

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Moscow, Hanoi's Offensive, and the Summit

Two basic factors must underlie any analysis of Soviet interventions in Vietnam. First, the USSR wants to see the North triumph over the South. It believes that such an outcome would be a major blow to its imperialist rival and would give a strong push to Communist interests, most particularly in Indochina but also on a global scale as well. Conversely, some decisive Southern victory in the conflict would be felt as an important setback to Soviet interests, given the high degree of Soviet commitment and support to Hanoi's cause.

Yet this proposition must be qualified. The USSR does not attach the same overriding priority to the struggle as does the DRV. In 1954 the Soviets worked out a deal with the French which fell well short of North Vietnam's objectives; by 1964 Khrushchev was all but ignoring the area. His successors have ^{proven} truer and more consistent allies, but-- even given the interests shared on the two sides--they can hardly be expected to subordinate all their international concerns to this single problem.

The second proposition is that Soviet room for maneuver is ~~limited~~
limited. It is dealing, not with a puppet, but with a distant,

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independent client to which, in the Communist context, it has obligations of some weight. Furthermore, this client has, in China, another patron which is eager to pillory the Soviet Union for any faltering in its support and gives military and economic aid of its own. The Soviets should derive some leverage from their position as supplier of complex, advanced weapons, but even here the Chinese could confound their attempts to apply this leverage by replacing them in this field as well, albeit incompletely and with difficulty.

Lastly, the North Vietnamese themselves are immensely jealous of their independence, and they work their relations with their two big supporters assiduously not only to maximize the aid, but also to minimize the influence of the donors.

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Soviets feel a special obligation to help in the air defense of North Vietnam, as a socialist state under bombing by the imperialists. As for military supplies intended for use in

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the South, the bulk are by now routinely supplied, and beyond this Moscow is anxious to help the DRV overcome the advantage in modern weapons which the other side has enjoyed. Hanoi for its part probably submits its aid requests with a minimum of explanations. The North Vietnamese are loathe to be drawn into the kinds of consultations which might grow into joint planning, lest they find themselves caught up in a bargaining relationship with the USSR. The Soviets can draw many conclusions from the kinds and volume of aid requested, plus intelligence from their people in North Vietnam, but they have no satisfactory mechanism for advising on strategy and tactics--that is, on matters beyond those affecting training in and use of their equipment. And they recognize that, given Hanoi's sensitivities and its Peking option, they would be treading on delicate ground if they sought to intrude into this sphere.

If these views are correct, then it is likely that over the last two years or so, and particularly after the DRV's heavy losses of equipment in Lam Son 719, the Soviet Union has been delivering to North Vietnam the large shipments of weapons and supplies being used in the present offensive. A number of military aid agreements have been announced during this period, including one in the ~~early summer~~ ^{Signature of} August 1971, another ~~October~~, in the ~~early autumn~~, and the most recent in December (the

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of aid deals

Chinese have kept pace throughout with similar announcements).

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[redacted] Moscow would

clearly have been aware that Hanoi was accumulating larger inventories than normal of tanks, for example, and long-range artillery. This process almost certainly began before the Soviets were aware of the President's planned visit to Peking, and before their own summit was scheduled. The Soviets could easily infer that the North Vietnamese were preparing for large-scale conventional action, which would occur during a dry season. They ~~were doubtless~~ ^{may have been} told as much, but they were probably not informed of Hanoi's detailed plans for a multi-front offensive, including its timing.

When, with this buildup in process, summit diplomacy began to develop ^{from July onward,} first in Peking and then in Moscow, the Soviets must have had to consider the relationship between their diplomacy and the Vietnam war. They may have thought, while secret US-North Vietnamese negotiations were going on, that a settlement was in view which would abort the coming offensive. If so, they could readily have foreseen an orchestration of such a settlement with their own ~~detente~~ diplomacy. In any event, this option disappeared in November, and their task then became how to relate what they knew of Hanoi's military plans to the May summit.

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Moscow could foresee several outcomes. First, the offensive North Vietnamese might score a big victory, of a scope to have major repercussions on South Vietnam's stability. This would not only be welcome for its own sake but, they would reason, would put them at an advantage vis-a-vis the President in Moscow. It would strengthen their general global position for the summit bargaining and, in any discussion of Vietnam, world, require the US to be the supplicant. It would thus be all to the good, unless the US reacted so negatively as to postpone or cancel the summit. And the Soviets would see some benefits even in this reaction, in that they would anticipate a weakening of the President's domestic position and electoral chances plus a major opportunity to cast the US in the role of the saboteur of detente. It is possible to argue that these advantages are so great that the USSR ~~has~~ hoped that a North Vietnamese offensive would provoke the US to put off the summit, and ~~has~~ even contrived to arrange matters to this end. Putting aside for the moment the question of its ability to control events in this fashion, it is doubtful that Moscow sees this as the preferred outcome. Its interest in a successful summit is substantial. It has a stake of some import in certain bilateral matters, especially arms control and trade. It has an interest

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in improved US-USSR relations as the centerpiece of a detente campaign which is meant to forward its interests in Western Europe. Most important of all, it is deeply concerned not to encourage the rapprochement between its major antagonists, China and the US, to a stage of ^{active} anti-Soviet cooperation, a contingency to which the Soviets have shown themselves acutely sensitive. Lastly they could have no assurance that Hanoi would not lose the battle, with the consequences described below.

Second, the North Vietnamese might suffer a major defeat. This would clearly be a bad outcome. Its only virtue, from the Soviet standpoint, would be to deflate the importance of the Vietnam issue as a problem in Soviet-US relations, thus leaving more time for the bilateral matters which are Moscow's primary incentive for a summit. But if this defeat had been accompanied by heavy US bombing of the North, the Soviets would have a hard time justifying any summit at all. This outcome could be a double defeat for the USSR.

Third, the battle could be indecisive. This would be, in terms of summit considerations along, an undesirable result, since Vietnam would ^fthen play an even larger role in the Soviet-US

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encounter, but without any new strength on the Communist side.

Fourth, as a special case of the third possibility, the outcome might be not only indecisive but hotly contested at the time of the summit itself. This would run the major risk of the first case--a US postponement or cancellation--and would put Moscow under pressure to do the same. If the summit nonetheless took place, this situation would almost guarantee that Vietnam would dominate the ~~summit~~ agenda. And Vietnam, to the Soviets, is the wrong issue for this meeting.

All these considerations, however, are rather beside the point if one accepts that there was little which the USSR could do about the North Vietnamese offensive anyway. We believe this to be the case. The Soviets have long been committed to the military support of North Vietnam, and they probably began to be committed to the aid which lies behind the present offensive before they arranged the Moscow summit. For the Politburo, it would have been a momentous decision to change course in the latter part of 1971. Supporters of a summit would have had the greatest difficulty in mustering a majority behind the proposition that North Vietnam should be pressed to call off its offensive and, failing that,

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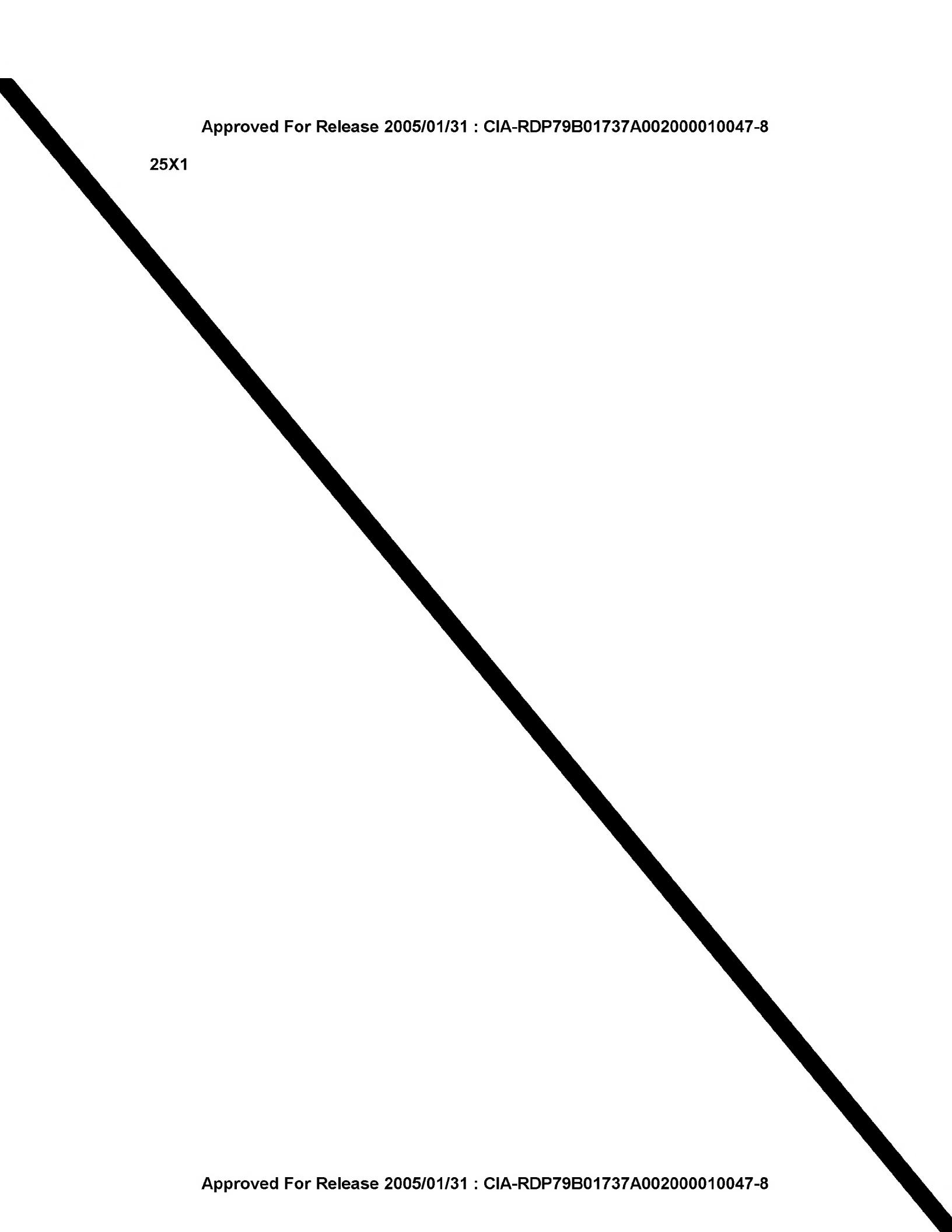
be sacrificed to the hoped for gains available under improved Soviet-American relations. In fact, it is doubtful that they would have prevailed, especially since it would have been argued that Hanoi would not have turned aside from its plans in any event, while prospects for ~~this~~ if the USSR withheld supplies success would diminish. However, the individual Soviet leaders appraised the situation, it would be uncharacteristic of the present leadership, which is closer to a collective than to the Khrushchevian model, to consider such radical alternatives.

In sum, the Soviets, through their long commitment to North Vietnam and the momentum of their military aid program, probably began to underwrite the present offensive without being fully consulted on Hanoi's specific intentions and before the summit was in view. They see dangers to their interests in the way in which Vietnam and the summit have become related, but the alternatives available to them as this relationship developed were even more unpalatable. As of now, they want both a North Vietnamese victory and a ~~but fearing that the key choices are beyond their control, summit, and they hope that these do not prove incompatible.~~

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